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Viewing cable 06MANAGUA578, NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: MADRIZ

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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2016

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SUBJECT: NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: MADRIZ

REF: MANAGUA 511

Classified By: AMBASSADOR PAUL TRIVELLI. REASONS 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Meetings with political, economic, and civil society leaders in the department of Madriz suggest that the department's Liberal roots remain strong, and that the FSLN can be beaten there, despite the fact that it currently controls most municipalities and enjoys considerable support and funding from European NGOs. Of the main emerging political movements, only that of Eduardo Montealegre appears to have made significant inroads in Madriz, co-opting much of the traditional PLC structure and forcing the PLC to recruit new, less experienced representatives. As in other departments, representatives of the various Liberal camps proclaimed a strong desire for unity to defeat the FSLN in November, and urged the USG to pressure all of the party leaders in Managua to come to terms. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On March 8-9, poloff and political FSN traveled to the northwestern department of Madriz on the Honduran border, and met local leaders to discuss the political and economic situation in the department eight months ahead of November national elections. Among our interlocutors were representatives of the "Vamos con Eduardo"/National Liberal Alliance (ALN), the Alliance for the Republic (APRE) and "Amigos de Alvarado", the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), "Movimiento Herty 2006", the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), Etica y Transparencia, the Catholic Church, and the PLC mayor

of the small municipality of Totogalpa. Post will report on social and economic issues septel. Since 1990, Madriz has generally been a strong department for the PLC, illustrated by the results of the 2000 municipal elections when the party took seven of nine municipalities. However, when the PLC ran a weak campaign in 2004 and the non-FSLN vote was sharply divided, the Sandinistas reversed the balance, taking seven towns. Nonetheless, even that year, the combined "democratic" vote would have been enough to win every municipality in the department except the capital of Somoto, where the FSLN defeated all other parties combined.

¶3. (C) Madriz is unquestionably one of the poorest and most neglected departments in Nicaragua. Other than maintaining one good road running through the department, there is very little that the GON or National Assembly has visibly done to develop infrastructure and promote economic growth in the department in recent years. As an example of "Managua's" lack of interest in the department, numerous interlocutors pointed out that Arnoldo Aleman's daughter, Maria Dolores, nominally represents Madriz as a regional deputy in the

National Assembly, despite the fact that she has never once visited the department or shown the slightest interest in it.

(Maria Dolores was the substitute deputy for Elvin Rene Pineda, who represented Madriz, and she replaced him after his December 2004 death.) There is little doubt that the FSLN will try to capitalize on such feelings of neglect by the PLC and three successive democratic governments.

FSLN HISTORICALLY WEAK IN MADRIZ, BUT BOOSTED BY 2004 ELECTIONS AND EUROPEAN LARGESSE

14. (C) All interlocutors agreed that while the FSLN has been historically weak in Madriz, its seven mayors elected in 2004 have exploited their positions to make inroads for the party.

According to everyone we met, numerous European (mainly Spanish) NGOs have brought large amounts of money into the department in the last two years. They allege that the FSLN has carefully used these funds for patronage and vote buying, implementing infrastructure projects in Sandinista neighborhoods and building houses for FSLN voters, while blatantly neglecting those that do not vote FSLN.

Representatives of all the non-Sandinista parties (including supporters of Herty Lewites) fear that the FSLN will leverage this European largesse to buy significant numbers of votes on election day. PLC department head Indalecio Gonzalez took the widespread complaints about "Spanish" activities one step farther, claiming that individuals with connections to the ETA terrorist group had found refuge in Madriz and were supporting the FSLN there. Emboffs asked Gonzalez to provide specific names or details, but he was unable to do so.

(Note: Post will request details on the NGOs and their leadership. If we verify the veracity of these allegations, the Ambassador will engage his Spanish counterpart on the matter.)

15. (C) Other alleged factors favoring the FSLN in Madriz include direct financing of the party's campaign by foreign governments (including the Government of Venezuela), and the claim that a number of Cuban television stations can be received in the department (perhaps via a cable system), reportedly transmitting a constant stream of propaganda for Castro, Chavez, and Ortega. However, numerous observers also described the FSLN elite in Madriz as the "new rich" who live off properties and businesses confiscated during the 1980s, and opined that the party lacked any strong, visible departmental leader. Daniel Ortega was actually in the capital of Somoto on March 8 and reportedly held a poorly attended rally; emboffs saw no evidence of any large public FSLN activity. Despite the specific FSLN advantages listed above, everyone described the party as eminently beatable in Madriz in November.

PLC REPRESENTATIVES LARGELY PRAGMATIC AND CALL FOR BROAD LIBERAL ALLIANCE

16. (C) PLC representatives in Madriz were among the most pragmatic PLC politicians emboffs have met thus far. Carlos Rafael Olivas, the PLC Vice Mayor of Totogalpa, one of the two Madriz municipalities to remain in PLC hands after the debacle of 2004, shared with emboffs that he and other local party activists favor a broad Liberal alliance including Jose Antonio Alvarado and Eduardo Montealegre. He argued that because the PLC is the largest Liberal political force, Alvarado and Montealegre must approach the PLC. Olivas admitted that the PLC had made mistakes and driven away people and groups that should be its allies, but he insisted that the PLC convention in April will be democratic and not simply a rubber stamp for Aleman. He named Jose Rizo, Ramiro Sacasa, and Francisco Aguirre Sacasa as the best PLC "pre-candidates." Olivas suggested that the USG should convene all the Liberal political leaders in Managua and pressure them to join forces. He ventured that authentic, inclusive primaries would be a good way to resolve differences and select leaders.

17. (C) Emboffs met the PLC department head for Madriz, Indalecio Gonzalez, at his residence for a private meeting.

Gonzalez is relatively young and new in his party office, as his two most recent predecessors both died in the last two years. Perhaps reflecting his newness in his job and the fact that he had no PLC audience to play to, Gonzalez was more open with emboffs than his counterparts have been in other departments visited so far. He complained about GON and media attacks on the PLC, but proclaimed a desire to work closely with the USG and admitted that the Aleman-Ortega pact had done severe damage to his party. While other PLC officials usually loudly deny that Aleman ever stole a cent from the Nicaraguan state, Gonzalez remained silent when emboffs stated that the evidence of Aleman's guilt was overwhelming. At the end of the meeting Gonzalez even admitted that he had nothing against Montealegre's ALN, but had aligned with the PLC because he believes his chances of being elected to the National Assembly are better with it than with Montealegre.

ALN HAS SOLID STRUCTURE, HAS MADE INROADS, AND BELIEVES IT COULD WIN MADRIZ ALONE IF NECESSARY

18. (C) The ALN department head for Madriz, obstetrician Jose Armando Herrera, told emboffs that he formerly held the same post for the PLC until he was sacked by Arnolfo Aleman for protesting Aleman's corruption and pact with Daniel Ortega. Herrera stated that when he left the PLC, he took the bulk of the party's departmental structure with him and that eighty percent of the PLC's experienced departmental leaders are now with the ALN. Herrera insisted that Montealegre is unquestionably the most popular candidate in Madriz, enjoying widespread support amongst Nicaraguans living across the Honduran border who will return to the department to vote on election day. Herrera described Madriz as one of Montealegre's strongest departments and stated that his polling numbers will be much higher in Madriz than their (already fairly high) national average.

19. (C) Herrera shared that liberal voters in impoverished Madriz are outraged with Aleman's theft of tens of millions of dollars from the state treasury, and they will not vote PLC as long as Aleman remains in charge of the party. Herrera urged the USG to "twist Aleman's arm" to remove him from politics and make possible Liberal unity, but he asserted that the ALN could win alone in Madriz if it were ultimately forced to run alone. As long as Aleman remains a factor, Herrera does not believe that the PLC will ever participate in real primaries. With the exception of the PLC, everyone else we spoke to agreed that Montealegre has campaigned more actively in Madriz than any other candidate and seems to have established himself as a viable third option in the department.

APRE PROPPED UP BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS; SUPPORT FOR ALVARADO QUESTIONABLE

10. (C) Unlike in most departments that emboffs have visited, the departmental heads of APRE and "Amigos de Alvarado" are not one and the same in Madriz. Emboffs met APRE head Ramona Centeno in her Somoto government office where she works for the Directorate of Taxation. Centeno claimed that APRE enjoys a solid departmental structure, but she admitted that it received virtually no guidance or financial support from Managua. She argued that Alvarado attracts the support of teachers and medical workers in Madriz because of his previous ministerial career. However, Centeno also largely conformed to the stereotype of the government bureaucrat supporting APRE purely in an effort to protect and advance her government career, as virtually every comment she made about APRE or Alvarado somehow linked back to her personal interests and activities.

11. (C) Dagoberto Bermudez, the Madriz head of "Amigos de Alvarado" is another government official, working as the Ministry of Health's departmental hospitals director. However, he was much more candid than Centeno. Bermudez admitted that APRE is a weak vehicle for Alvarado because it

is widely seen as a "government party" that forced GON employees to support it. However, Bermudez insisted that Alvarado enjoys more popularity than his party vehicle. Bermudez argued that the "radical" PLC bases will never vote for Montealegre, but they would vote for Alvarado, and claimed that Alvarado could even take some votes from the FSLN. Bermudez opined that Jose Rizo, Montealegre, and Alvarado must unify their forces immediately for the sake of Nicaragua. Other than Alvarado's supporters, no one emboffs met in Madriz reported that Alvarado has campaigned seriously in Madriz or has any structure other than government officials supporting him or his party. ALN representative Herrera claimed that most of the nominal APRE members in Madriz really support Montealegre and the ALN.

HERTY WIDELY DISTRUSTED IN MADRIZ AND POPULAR SUPPORT
QUESTIONABLE

¶12. (C) Emboffs met a half-dozen supporters of Herty Lewites in the candidate's Somoto campaign office, which had the words "Siempre Sandinista" (Always Sandinista) painted in large letters on the walls outside. Despite the need to use such rhetoric to maintain his credentials with left-leaning voters, Lewites' supporters insisted that their candidate will never return to the "Danielista" FSLN. They dismissed the poor showing of Lewites' alliance in the Atlantic Coast elections (reftel), attributing it to the fact that the movement only had two months to organize there. They also noted that during the Atlantic Coast campaign, the FSLN focused most of its attacks on Herty, rather than on the PLC. The Lewites followers claimed he enjoys a solid organization and urban and rural support throughout Madriz. They recounted that spreading knowledge about the Aleman-Ortega pact is one of their most effective campaign tools.

¶13. (C) In a mirror image of the fears that are usually expressed on the right (and that emboffs heard throughout Madriz) about Lewites going back to the FSLN, Lewites' supporters in Madriz fear that Montealegre and Alvarado might rejoin Aleman's PLC, possibly under pressure from the USG. Most people on the right in Madriz claimed that the entire Herty campaign is a ruse designed to make the right think that it can safely enter the elections divided since the left is divided as well. Even those who did not regard the Herty campaign as a trap doubted whether he would have much impact on the FSLN vote in Madriz and feared that in a four way presidential race, Daniel Ortega could win in the first round.

PLC OFFICIAL IN CHARGE OF LOCAL CSE OFFICE IS ASLEEP AT THE
WHEEL AND FSLN IS REALLY RUNNING THINGS

¶14. (C) The departmental head of the CSE, Rodolfo Jose Alfaro Garcia, is a PLC appointee, but all interlocutors described him to emboffs as a "weak" administrator and stated that FSLN bureaucrats working under him really run the CSE departmental office, employing all the familiar Sandinista tactics to prevent non-FSLN voters from obtaining voter identification documents (cedulas) and casting their ballots on election day. Everyone, including the PLC departmental head and the PLC Vice Mayor of Totogalpa, stated that they had no confidence whatsoever in Alfaro and feared that the FSLN might try every tactic in the book to steal the vote in November.

¶15. (C) When emboffs met Alfaro in his office, he lived up to his reputation, turning on a baseball game and rarely taking his eyes off the television while emboffs tried to discuss the local electoral process with him. Alfaro offered nothing more than vague statements that the CSE is "doing its job" in Madriz, and that while the voting register is filled with dead people and some citizens in rural areas have trouble obtaining cedula, everything will "somehow work out" on election day. Unfortunately, Movimiento Por Nicaragua, which might be able to apply pressure on the local CSE office and assist citizens in obtaining cedula, appears to have little or no presence in Madriz. No one emboffs met was aware of any Movimiento activity in the department and Juan

Carlos Espinoza, the group's nominal organizer in Madriz, failed to show up for a meeting he had previously confirmed.

MADRIZ: DEMOGRAPHICS AND VOTING PROFILE

¶16. (U)

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------|
| Total Population (2003 est.): | 133,974 |
| Total Urban Population: | 37,898 |
| Total Rural Population: | 96,076 |

Votes Received by Party, 2004 Municipal Elections

| | |
|-------|--------|
| PLC: | 25,490 |
| FSLN: | 29,571 |
| APRE: | 1,196 |
| CCN: | 196 |
| PLI: | 91 |
| AC: | 211 |
| PLN: | 80 |
| PRN: | 1,067 |
| MSL: | 100 |

COMMENT: LIBERAL CAMP SHOULD WIN IN MADRIZ, BUT NOTHING IS CERTAIN AS LONG AS DIVISIONS REMAIN

¶17. (C) Madriz is a department that the Liberal camp should win in November, whether because the ALN succeeds in co-opting enough of the PLC structure and base or because leaders in Managua see reason and form a broad alliance. Given their fears of the FSLN returning to power, non-FSLN voters in Madriz are likely to gravitate to whatever force seems most likely to defeat the Sandinistas. However, while the ALN might be able to win alone if enough voters flock to it, a continuing Liberal division clearly creates opportunities for the FSLN that it will not have if the Liberal camp is unified. Unfortunately, local political leaders seem unwilling or unable to convey this message to Managua, and they continue to abdicate responsibility for marginalizing Arnoldo Aleman and bringing about Liberal unity to the USG.

TRIVELLI